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ABSTRACT

Many storytellers, educators, and researchers advocate that storytelling can contribute significantly to early literacy development. Early childhood education needs to embrace literacy programs that actively employ storytelling to bridge students' established oracy skills and their newfound literacy skills. By doing this, children will encounter a broad range of language: new words, archaic expressions, puns, phrases, rhymes, metaphors, and more. This establishes an extensive oral language base which builds literacy skills, such as word recognition, spelling, grammar, literary conventions, and comprehension. It is essential to present storytelling and literacy experiences that are meaningful to the children, and therefore their social and cultural experience needs to be reflected in the choice of stories and the choice and use of text. Teachers should cultivate the development of children's literacy skills by providing opportunities to play with words, with story, and with text. (Contains 16 references.) (SR)

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by Louise Phillips

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The Role of Storytelling in Early Literacy Development

by Louise Phillips
Bachelor of Education paper

Many storytellers, educators and researchers advocate that storytelling can contribute significantly to early literacy development. (Mallan, 1991; Jennings, 1991: Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992; Glazer & Burke, 1994)

Storytelling is clearly a social experience with oral narrative, incorporating linguistic features that display a "sophistication that goes beyond the level of conversation" (Mallan, 1991: 14). And for this reason storytelling acts as an effective building block easing the journey from oracy to literacy. Literacy is a second order language system that requires oral competency as a prerequisite (Dyson, 1991; Hall, 1987) and, as a sophisticated oral art form, storytelling certainly offers significant input toward oral language competency, along with many significant links to written language.

Both oracy and literacy are forms of communication between human beings: in essence a social interaction. They are both meaningful and usually purposeful, with many purposes and functions (Hall, 1987: 17).

However, our written language is far more complex than our spoken language. Snow & Tabors (1993) clearly define writing as "a system of its own", that builds on the base of oracy, then grows far beyond it. This is exemplified through the following statistics on vocabulary.

"...a list of 10 000 words essentially exhausts the vocabulary anyone - even a highly educated adult - uses in speaking (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). For reading and writing, on the other hand, educated English speakers might know as many as 100 000 words." (p. 9)

Literate adults usually use far more complex words when they are writing than when they speak. When children are learning to read and write, their oral language vocabulary will obviously be greater. Snow and Tabors have found that a well established oral language vocabulary is essential for the development of young children's written vocabulary. Children can sound out a written word more efficiently if they know what it is meant to sound like (phonology); and if they know the meaning (semantics) of words, they can predict where they might occur in a text (pp. 9-10). Cooper, Collins and Saxby (1992) claim that regular storytelling experience increases young children's vocabulary, as they encounter a broad range of new words through story (pp.10-11), thereby supporting the development of their written vocabulary.

Children may learn to write English by sounding out single letters (alphabetic system); syllables; or through whole word recognition. Rhyming word play and reciting lists of words with the same beginning sounds (for example by playing with tongue twisters), give children "metaphonological awareness", that Snow and Tabors believe to be "a direct route into the sound-symbol correspondences crucial to reading" (p.8). Dyson (1993: 30) also supports this claim that rhyming language can contribute to early spelling. Many storytelling experiences do incorporate word play, such as rhymes and tongue twisters, and a good children's storyteller will invite children to actively participate in these repeatedly throughout a story, until the children are playing with these words for the rest of the day and perhaps for many days or weeks after.

In terms of grammar, the syntax in written language is more complex than in spoken language, and more diverse sentence forms are used. When writing there is an expectation to be concise, exact and complete. We consider more carefully the structure of the sentences that we write than the sentences that we speak. Written language often compresses information into sentences by using connections such as conjunctions and participial constructions (Snow & Tabors, 1993: 12). A told story is thoughtfully crafted, consequently the grammar is more complex than everyday spoken language. Machado (1995: 197) refers to this as 'story grammar' and acknowledges the distinct linguistic features of narrative storytelling. Mallan (1991: 16) declares that children gain an understanding of syntactic structure and organisation when they listen to stories, that can then act as a reference framework for when they create their own stories. Storytelling can demonstrate varied and appropriate use of tense and linking devices (p.14); along with indicators of who is speaking or scripted dialogue; and detailed descriptions: all grammatical features that parallel with written language.

Storytelling as an art form also employs literary conventions, such as point of view, plot, style, characterisation, setting and theme (Mallan, 1991: 15). Many different genres can be explored through storytelling, in the same way that varied genres occur in written form. Mallan claims that through regular storytelling experience of diverse genres, children will soon learn to expect certain features of that genre. This is typified by the resounding replication of stories beginning with 'once upon a time' and ending with 'happy ever after'. This knowledge builds a 'sense of story'. Children develop a schema of what story is: what it consists of and what it is about. This then gives them a framework for understanding story texts. Jennings (1991) confirms this with her observation that children who have had frequent oral encounters with story, can then make successful predictions when reading narrative (p.10).

Further more storytelling enhances comprehension skills.

"When storytelling is combined with judicious questioning and retelling strategies, comprehension skills at the literal, inferential and critical levels can be developed (Dwyer 1988)" (Mallan, 1991: 13).

These skills are highly useful for reading comprehension. Those same cognitive skills of creating mental imagery, making inferences and causal links are used when listening to a told story as when reading a text, however interpretation of written language requires more than comprehension skills. Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that children draw from their entire 'symbolic repertoire' in order to interpret the symbols of text (Dyson, 1991:102). If symbol systems are "people's way of organising and responding to experience" (p.107), then storytelling certainly presents opportunities for this. Stories can act as a reference point, as children decipher what living in the world is all about.

"Favat sees children as turning to fairytales because they provide ordering devices which can then be applied to the chaos of their everyday worlds." (Davies, 1989: 43).

Recurring motifs clearly demonstrate story's use of symbols, for example the wolf motif symbolises the evil, dangerous enemy. By the time children go to school, regardless of their social or cultural background, they "are able to construct or symbolise worlds in oral stories, drawing and play" (Dyson, 1991: 106).

Dyson (1991), Hall (1987) and Gilbert (1990) all advocate the importance of accepting social and cultural influences on young children's literacy development.

"..young children from diverse sociocultural backgrounds bring their symbol producing prolificity to school - their talking, drawing, playing, storytelling, and in our society, some kind of experience with print, all of which offer resources with which both teachers and children can build new possibilities" (Dyson, p.117).

Different backgrounds provide different experiences and interpretations. Hall (1987) vows that literacy development must only be considered with an understanding of the significance of literacy in the culture of the broader society as well as the specific culture of each individual child (p.8). Storytelling is distinctly a social and cultural experience and for many young children is a comfortable link between oracy and literacy. This has been evidenced by Dyson (1993) in her study of William, whose African American background submerged him in playful storytelling. He developed into a story writer with a strong sense of writing as interactive play, clearly influenced by his sociocultural traditions of rhythmic 'to and froing' interactions. By William having his sociocultural traditions supported in his educational environment, he effectively achieved competence in his writing skills, as he wrote the stories he enjoyed telling. Text will only have meaning for young children, if their social and cultural experiences of language (both oral and written) are built into their literacy program. Gilbert (1990) stresses that we should "promote critical social literacy by focussing on the cultural construction of reading and writing practices" (p.77).

The above example of William demonstrates how storytelling can inspire writing. Cooper, Collins & Saxby (1992) also claim that it enhances reading skills, by inspiring children to search for a told story in text form. In addition, children who have heard a story told, will be more capable of reading a text of the same story by using prediction

skills from their established story knowledge. Isbell (1979) conducted a storytelling study that compared two groups of three to six year olds over an eight week period. One group had a story read to them three times a week, and the other had stories told to them three times a week. When the group who had stories told to them were asked to retell the story, they were more capable of retelling it. They included more story conventions; told longer and more sequential stories; and employed more diverse vocabulary, than those that had been read to (Raines & Isbell, 1994: 264). This highlights how the heightened comprehension skills (as discussed earlier) that storytelling demands, further expand children's knowledge and language skills.

Glazer and Burke (1994) stress the value of young children retelling a story (after listening), in that it enhances their awareness of story structure; and they can recall and comprehend more effectively, which in turn guides them in creating their own stories. In fact they claim that story retellings can signal acceleration towards literacy. Consequently, they advocate inviting young children to retell a story after listening to it, and that questioning be used to prompt the recall of more story elements. They argue that the questions are internalised, and that the child will eventually ask themselves the question to guide their own recall.

Britsch (1992) studied a group of three to four year olds' experience of storytelling for one year. From this experience she discovered the supreme value of 'talk story', exemplified by "cooperative narration of a story by two storytellers at the writing table" (p.6). (A similar approach to writing as that of William discussed earlier, where ideas are discussed openly before, during and after they are written down). At the age of three and four these children would have been recording their stories with symbolic images. Vygotsky labelled this as "graphic speech", which paved the way for writing (Dyson, 1993: 24). Through this experience the children were beginning to understand that written language is a means of representing their thoughts. This was made even more clear when they dictated their stories to a scribing adult. Britsch embraced the approach of allowing reading and writing to emerge within play situations, in essence "cultivating" it rather than imposing it. By implementing a storytelling based program, where both adults and children told and shared stories, this developed a sense of community and nurtured the culture of the group, so that the children could freely play with words.

"storytelling provided an introduction to the idea that stories come from within themselves and not just without, and to the understanding that written language is an accessible tool." (Britsch, 1992: 182)

Miller and Mehler (1994) support this with their findings that many educators believe personal storytelling serves as an effective bridge into early literacy (e.g Bruner, 1984: Rosen, 1988). They also found that personal storytelling occurred most frequently in classrooms that had the most favourable teacher-pupil ratio, and that many families provide a richer context for personal narrative. This clearly supports arguments for more one-to-one and small group interactions in educational settings, along with working together with parents and families in the education of their children.

Snow and Tabors (1993) also stress the value of small group and one-to-one interactions, so that children have more opportunities to move from co-constructing literate forms to recording them independently. They explain how socio-dramatic play provides such opportunities, and builds connections between oral language and literacy development. These activities inspire children to play out scripts or narrative-based actions, which employ past, future, and cognitive verbs, noun phrases, and cohesion markers, all of which are connected to literate forms. Heath (1982) found that by providing young children, with a wide variety of scripts and narratives to play with, they build a greater sense of narrative (Snow & Tabors, 1993: 16). This is a helpful knowledge base for aiding in interpretations when reading, and construction when writing. There are also many ways of incorporating print into socio-dramatic play, such as the use of menus; writing letters; shopping lists and grocery labels; newspapers and magazines; price lists and so on.

Early childhood education needs to embrace literacy programs, that actively employ storytelling to bridge their established oracy skills and their new found literacy skills. By doing this children will encounter a broad range of language: new words, archaic expressions, puns, phrases, rhymes, chants, tongue twisters, metaphor, figures of speech, and revoiced dialogue (Cooper, Collins & Saxby, 1992: Dyson & Genishi, 1994). This establishes an extensive oral language base for building on literacy skills, such as word recognition, spelling, grammar, literary conventions and comprehension. It is essential to present storytelling and literacy experiences that are meaningful to the children, therefore their social and cultural experience needs to be reflected in the choice of stories and the choice and use of text. Cultivate the development of children's literacy skills, by providing opportunities to play with words, with story, and with text. After hearing a story invite children to retell it (orally), reenact it, or retell it (in 'graphic speech' or text). Employ effective questioning to extend their retelling skills. Embrace the creation of children's own stories expressed in any form, be it orally, pictorially, acted out or written down; and extend their skills by playing with it in a number of these different forms. Build on children's knowledge of narrative and their understanding of the world, by exposing them to a broad range of texts that further extends their writing and reading skills. To further enhance the effectiveness of this approach, plenty of opportunity for one-to-one and small group interactions should be structured into the program, along with a commitment to working with parents towards the literacy development of their children.

"Children's language blossoms when caregivers observe closely the interests of children and capitalize on these to stimulate literacy, when children are invited to share their experiences and their stories, when ready help is available in reading and writing, when a listening ear is always present, and when a telling, story-laden tongue is available." (Glazer & Burke, 1994: 163)

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